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Transport 148-135-31-225 woes lead to calls for new chief

**Lawmakers urge
Sanford to fill top
vacancy at agency
overseeing Medicaid**

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COLUMBIA — Two of the state Legislature's top leaders on Wednesday called on Gov. Mark Sanford to quickly appoint a new director for the agency that oversees Medicaid.

The call came after another day of hearings on the state's

new Medicaid transportation system disclosed more nightmarish scenarios experienced by some of the state's poorest patients.

An official with the agency administering Medicaid told senators after the hearing that his agency needed to "step up the heat a little" with the companies hired this year to manage transportation for Medicaid patients. But he said there have been improvements since the new system went into effect May 1.

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler and House Speaker

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Bobby Harrell on Wednesday publicly asked Sanford to immediately fill the director's job at the state Department of Health and Human Services, a post that has been vacant two months. Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer called for the same thing on Tuesday.

Harrell charged that the agency suffers from "what appears to be a lack of leadership and lack of accountability."

Joel Sawyer, a spokesman for Sanford, said the statements by Bauer and Harrell were "crassly political."

"We've never heard this level of noise from the Legislature with any of our other cabinet appointments," he said, "which is just more clear evidence that this is a crassly political witch hunt."

"We obviously welcome the Legislative Audit Council to look at these services. But we don't believe the way these problems are being brought to light is in the best interest of these service recipients."

The political volley came a day after the Legislative Audit Council voted to look at the new transportation system, which was criticized by patients, their advocates and medical professionals at a hearing called by Bauer in Greenville on Monday.

Wednesday's packed hearing of the Senate Medical Affairs Committee in Columbia found many of the same complaints from representatives of ambulance services, a hospital and a regional transportation system.

Members of the committee said they had already received many complaints from constituents.

"We're here today because you all screwed up," Sen. Robert

Ford, a Charleston Democrat, told officials of Health and Human Services.

The new system essentially switches from one in which the state contracted with county agencies, which then contracted with private companies, to a system in which two private firms manage Medicaid non-emergency transportation services, much like managed care companies handle health care.

Sanford asked the agency to privatize management of transportation services after costs grew 50 percent over three years, senators were told in a briefing Wednesday.

In 2005, the state issued a request for proposals and in November 2006 issued its intent to award the contracts to Medical Transportation Management Inc. of St. Louis and Logisticare, of Atlanta. Some competitors protested and the contracts were officially awarded in March.

Peeler told the story of a liver transplant patient who needed to visit a doctor in Charleston. He was taken on a three-day journey in the new system, he said, to a Rock Hill bus station, sent by bus to Charleston, where a taxi picked him up and carried him to a hospital and his doctor.

HHS officials said the old system relied too much on ambulances, which weren't always needed.

Alaina Macia, president of MTM, said the patient only traveled 36 hours and would have had to drive five hours one way had he been driven directly to the doctor.

"It still would have been a long day," she said.

She said her company, which operates in 30 states, tries to find medical services closer to home for such patients.

Macia said her firm received 499 complaints in May and 305 in June, while providing 47,000 trips for patients.

"We are committed to making this work in South Carolina," she said.

William Wells, a deputy director at HHS, told senators that one reason the agency wanted to privatize management of transporting patients was to prevent and reduce fraud and abuse.

He said the agency had nine open fraud cases, with three more likely, and that 10 involved ambulance services. The system transports 110,000 Medicaid patients a year.

He told of a case where a patient was dropped at a doctor's office and then went across the street to a Wal-Mart.

"I really resent this," Ford replied. "You're talking about massive fraud and you name nine cases?"

Others said the new management firms are using the same providers but paying less. As a result, one representative of ambulance services said, those in wheelchairs are dropped off at the curb instead of being taken inside.

Others said some patients' doctor appointments are now missed because they don't get picked up, some end up spending the night at doctors' offices or a hospital or wait for longer periods without food or fluids.

Randy Lee, president of the South Carolina Health Care Association, an organization of nursing homes, accused the new managers of "mind-boggling callousness." He asked if someone should be charged with neglect.

"The next time one of our residents is left for hours without nutrition or hydration, are we supposed to call the sheriff?" he asked. "I would say yes."

Wells told the senators "there would be some serious discussions" with the management firms over the complaints and ways to improve service.

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